

' Discussing what, connecting who ? Clues and hunches about the relationship between French historians and on-line communities '

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Time was ripe for alarm recently on the electronic list H-Français <sup>1</sup>. The association of the Clionautes, which is the spearhead of the list, was preparing its annual meeting for March 22nd 2003, and there seemed to be a lack of volunteers to take over, maintain the website, moderate the list, scour the web and the press for information. Is the first generation who created the list in 1996 <sup>2</sup> on the verge of overwork and weariness? Quite likely so. Of course, there was also a rhetoric of self-infliction in this occasion. But the pattern is quite familiar to the subscribers of electronic lists, where the change of the guards between the founders and a new generation of moderators and active contributors is often problematic. Last week, the moderators of Biblio.fr also showed some signs of doubt after the recent cancellation of the conference the list was organizing, cancellation that was due to a low number of participants.<sup>3</sup> H-urban, my electronic Alma Mater, finds it difficult to imagine ways and means to imagine a 'life after Wendy Plotkin', her incredibly active founder who is beginning to feel the burden of some 10 years of electronic commitment. But more important to our current discussion are the features of H-Français. With more than a thousand subscribers and more than a half decade of life, H-Francais is the only vast list connecting French historians properly speaking. The trick is that H-Francais is devoted to the teaching of history and geography in secondary and high schools, and provides a link between teachers who interact with enduring success around pedagogical practices, professional concerns, historical questions or electronic resources for the teaching of history and geography. A few academics belong to the list, but they don't seem to rank among the most active subscribers. In fact, French historians and on-line communities are worlds apart. My very presence here is a clue. If we trust the session organisers' perspicacity, they would probably have found

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<sup>1</sup> General info on H-Français, an affiliate of H-Net, can be found at <http://www.clionautes.org/spip> ; <http://www.clionautes.org/index2.htm> and <http://www.fdn.fr/~fjarraud> .

<sup>2</sup> Dominique Pascaud provided an overview of the list and its work in his contribution to the report on 'les communautés délocalisées d'enseignants', available at [www.pner.org](http://www.pner.org)

<sup>3</sup> Biblio.fr, created in 1993 to organise discussion and circulate information in the field of documentation and information (including library and archival work), is by far the largest list in French, with 11924 registered subscribers in March 2003 (<http://listes.cru.fr/www/info/biblio.fr>)

someone more mainstream to talk about our subject if such a person had existed. Mentioning my characteristics sounds like a check-list of a spaceship bound to failure: I am not working in a University but in the French national research institution (CNRS); I am not even classified in its historical department but in an hybrid multidisciplinary section specialised in urban studies; I am not a member of any French professional historical society; I am not working for any French historical journal; my current research does not deal with France and it's been a while since I have not published an article in French or gone to a conference in France. I am lucky enough to have a genuine French accent, so you can still hesitate about throwing me out of this room for usurpation. But this list gives you an idea of how much peripheral I am to the French historical world, at least institutionally speaking. The very fact that I can be here to say a few words about French electronic communities of historians underline how much peripheral they are too. To make you feel less uncomfortable, I will organise my contribution within the familiar French 'three-steps' frame. I will first describe the connecting work that takes place in France, then I shall suggest some elements about the presence of French historians on international lists. Having mapped the situation, I will propose some hypothesis on the relationship between French historians and electronic lists. But let me stress first I would not be able to paint this picture without the help of several French colleagues, list members, list moderators or list subscribers, who have made the major contribution to this paper.<sup>4</sup> Though my description of the field is surely not comprehensive, whatever sharpness it includes does come from their willingness to offer information and to engage into discussion. I am, of course, responsible for the interpretation of the data they provided me with. Even so, I have overstated many hypothesis to provide our session with material to discuss, and all of this is very tentative, purposively formulated for our meeting. But so long with cautiousness.

### **Electronic lists in France**

The landscape of electronic connections between professional historians is in fact a pretty barren one. Before turning to electronic lists strictly speaking, it must be said that there are some effective services offering information about conferences or workshops. A few specialised gateways like the Menestrel website (<http://www.ccr.jussieu.fr/urfist/menestrel>) for medieval history provide such a service, but the most enduring, comprehensive and efficient of all is the Calenda monthly bulletin board, a by product of Revues.org, the

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<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, Denis Bocquet, Marin Dacos, Antoinette Fauve-Chaumoux, Christophe Le Dréau, Philippe Poirrier, Pierre Portet, Philippe Rygiel and Alexis Spire for their time, information and opinions.

electronic scientific edition complex put together by Marin Dacos at the Université d'Avignon (also available on the web at [www.revues.org/calenda/](http://www.revues.org/calenda/) ). This is a successful example of mutualized information, though the material that is excavated by the Calenda team is a very basic one, made of themes, dates, programmes and links for supplementary information. But this might well be the only sort of information that the community of French historians is ready to share. The examination of three historical electronic lists will be used here to develop this hypothesis.

I have selected those three lists because they are, as far as my information goes, the only three moderated and opened lists in the French historical profession. For sure, some others do exist, <sup>5</sup> but those three have adopted the standards of electronic lists which include moderation, opened subscription <sup>6</sup> and archiving of posted messages. They also have in common their size (about 200 subscribers) and their relatively quiet traffic (between 15 and some 150 messages a month for the most important one). Interestingly, they belong to quite different atmospheres: *Menestrel* is a list in medieval history that was set up in 2002, with the idea to accelerate the circulation of information that a group of internet oriented medieval historians were already disseminating through their website. *Vingtcinquante* was launched in 2001 by a group of non-internet addicts PhD students who knew one another and shared an interest for the political history of the years 1920-1950. They aimed at making information in the field available for young researchers. *Histoireimmig* was also created in 2002, initiated by the prolific Philippe Rygiel who maintains the Clio website at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris (<http://barthes.ens.fr/clio>), a social history site with a specific focus on the history of immigration. It is striking that none of these connecting ventures has been launched or supported by a powerful professional association, or by a senior and well established historian. In geographical, institutional or corporative terms, they stand at the periphery of the historical field.

All three are wholly devoted to the circulation of information. Table of contents, meetings, special lectures, weblinks and conferences announcements make the very most of their traffic. Some moderators suggest this is not that easy. Some types of information are

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<sup>5</sup> Apart from non moderated Yahoo lists, like the one on Russian history, several 'institutional' lists have developed with more or less success. For example the list organised by the CRESSIB at the Université de Pau, for British studies, or the list by the Association des historiens modernistes des universités françaises, or the lists that the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques has set up to irrigate its research groups. But none of them is moderated or opened to the non-members of the said institutions

<sup>6</sup> Subscription to *Histoireimmig* is not an automated process. A request is to be sent to the founder of the list to subscribe.

hard to get (job announcements, PhD defences announcements), especially on subject and in fields where resources and opportunities are scarce and competition is fierce. None of them has yet attempted any long term editorial development, for example to provide book reviews or to establish discussion threads. In fact, those who have tried found the attempt quite tricky. In one of the lists, a project to establish a program of books and PhD defences reviews was deemed too hot, and the few reviews which were circulated were controlled and polished enough to be dustjacket blurbs. *Menestrel* is in fact the only list that features questions and answers, mostly about how to find a specific medieval manuscript or to identify a source of some sort. According to one moderator, the questions do find their answers, but the use of the list to develop queries of the sort came relatively late in its (young) history. And, even there, the exchange is mostly one way, from demand (students, foreign scholars) to supply (French University professors), while on the other lists it goes from moderators to subscribers. In all three cases, subscribers are mostly information consumers, and not very intense information suppliers. Though, the best characterization of those three lists is that they are information lists. Conversation with some lists moderators suggests this orientation is both the product of a choice and of a constraint.

Indeed, some of my contact people suggested that, together with many of their subscribers, they considered big electronic lists, such as the H-Net ones, as being much too trivial, noisy and time consuming. I don't linger on this, as I will come back to this point in the second part of this paper. Accordingly, they chose to promote list standards where every message was an information, no more, no less, and some even developed a control of the flow to maintain a low level of traffic, at the subscribers request. But constraint was also a strong inducement to take the road of information. My interlocutors stress that the very quantitative aspect of their lists would not allow discussion or debate to take place, notwithstanding the fact that it would need too much time and energy than they are ready to devote to the lists in the present state of recognition of such an activity. But the major factors of this reluctance are clearly identified and were strongly pushed forward in the conversation, sometimes at the suggestion of this author, sometimes by the interviewed themselves. The lack of a culture of discussion among French historians on one hand, their professional and disciplinary mode of operation on the other, were pointed at as the crucial constraints that explained what the lists could do and what they could not. The difficulties in finding wide ranging information, as well as the limits in establishing lists as means of debate inside the community, were said to be related to those two points on which I will elaborate in my third part. But French electronic lists are not the only ones to be subscribed by French historians. They also participate to lists in English, and probably to some in other languages I was not able to locate or understand. Their place and role in those lists deserve our attention in order to push forward the first hunches already gathered.

## French historians and international electronic lists

Though, material is scarce to pronounce on this place and role. It is likely that a more serious research based on subscribers lists would complete or quash what I am to tell you, but you don't have much more possibility than to take the chance of my DIY survey. I will briefly consider three stages of involvement in electronic lists: subscription, participation and moderation. My observations will deal mostly with a few lists, though some can be considered as the most likely to lure French historians in. H-France, H-Med and H-Urban are the basis of this very sketchy approach to the activity of French historians on electronic lists, though parallel information about Textel, H-demog and a few others seem to go in the same direction.

As far as subscribers are concerned, I will take it as a hint that in 1999 there were 18 people with a personal address ending in '.fr' among the some 1300 H-urban subscribers (22 of 2037 last week). The addresses in '.fr' are 67 of the current 390 subscribers of H-Med, a list dedicated to Mediterranean studies, and 25 out of the 2500 H-Museum subscribers. The closer from French history, the stronger the subscription, which is not surprising in a country where national history is still the overwhelming field of research, teaching and publication. But, in any case, only a very small fraction of French historians (and, of course, subscribers to the lists mentioned above are not all historians) seem to pay interest to electronic international lists.<sup>7</sup> Even less do participate to the life of those lists. Very rare are those who consider it worth posting information to their list, both as a basic sharing gesture and as a way to circulate information about French historical research. Things are even poorer when it comes to discussion. Though I have kept myself quiet during the last months in H-Urban discussions, in a moment when there were fewer of them, it is hard to remember to have seen any other French subscriber joining an H-Urban discussion in 6 years, though once or twice some French information was circulated by somebody else. The same thing is true on H-France, despite the obvious relevancy of the list subject. Even the recent and non very satisfactory exchanges about the Iraq crisis did not generate much heat at this end of the cables. Only a handful of French historians, most of them junior academics participate to the life of the list and post some messages, and French subscribers never venture into expressing scientific ideas on the list. In fact, it is quite revealing that the French who have been noticed to answer the questions of their foreign on H-France colleagues are mostly archivists and not academics. The pyramid gets even narrower if one tries to locate French historians with a deeper involvement. Cynthia Ghorra Gobin, current French book review

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<sup>7</sup> And not very swiftly: the first French subscriber to join H-Med came after the first one hundred

editor and board member for H-Urban,<sup>8</sup> or Antoinette Fauve-Chaumoux, former H-Net Board member, have dedicated time to those commitments, while Denis Bocquet, one of the founding members and current moderators of H-Med, and Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, a member of H-France Board, are making a contribution to new lists or new features of established lists. There might be more of them than what I have been able to dig out. But in any case I would be surprised to hear about any senior established French historian who would pay interest to an international list, as subscriber, contributor or editor. Clearly, our sample is, again, not in the core of the profession, though its members can have an established reputation in their field. But what those few are and what they say is nevertheless interesting, beginning by the lack of interest or understanding they meet when they try to explain what they do and why they do it to French colleagues.

What I have found the most striking in the discussions I had with those few, was that they were inquiring minds, curious to learn and to share with foreign scholars and on foreign historical research. All of them, indeed, have a transnational or international subject or speciality, that fuelled this interest for the wider world. They are also characterised by peripheral geographical, disciplinary or institutionnal positions. Here again, this is definitely not the core of the French historical profession that is involved in international lists. From my conversations with some of them, I would also like to stress an attitude that I share: we are people who are not fitting, for different reasons and with different degrees, with the French historical profession. This does not mean we are rebels, outsiders or lone riders. Clearly, as far as I am concerned, I am also -at least loosely- embedded in the French historical profession, and it includes people I like to exchange with. But there is a widely shared set of scientific and professional values, behaviours and views that I wish to keep as far away as possible. In this sense, the participation to international on line communities is, at least for me, a way to find a substitution community where our subjects can be discussed, and where we can speak and listen without the burden of these disliked values, behaviours and views. Among those are precisely the lack of a culture of discussion and the professional and scientific modes of operation of the discipline and profession, those factors that were described as hampering the development of French electronic lists. I hope this will make you forgive me this excess of complacency, that was relevant for our subject of the day, and allows me to begin the last act of this talk.

### **Mutual incompatibility ? French historians and the electronic list, some final remarks**

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<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Ghorra Gobin is a geographer, so I have not got in touch with her on those matters.

You may have realised that I love talking about myself. I won't disappoint you introducing this last section by coming back on my experience as a subscriber, book reviews editor, book reviewer and board member of H-Urban since March 1996. I will make it brief nevertheless. Out of the fact that it was quite easy to develop a book reviewing activity on European Urban History between 1997 and 2000, with the help of many young – and some less young-European urban scholars, it proved more difficult to push the French reviewers to develop very critical readings and to offer reviews that would come to grip with the books reviewed. Only a handful thought this was a good opportunity to write reviews that would be neither eulogical praises nor flashing assassinations, these insipid or falsely hot styles filling up the current review sections of French historical journals, assassination by silence being the most current way to review a book nobody agrees with. A very short extract from this experience can account for this reluctance to engage books. One of those H-Urban reviews I had commissioned was re-published by one of the major French historical journals, as some of its editors had appreciated the way it was written and what it had to say. The editor of the book, and some contributors, all senior historians with an established standing were subsequently quite vocal in complaining about the critics they had received, and one went on to suggest that reviews of this kind should be approved by the authors of the reviewed books before being published. My point is not to establish whether the critics were fully justified or not, but to stress that the freedom international electronic lists can provide may not be welcomed by a part of the historical French profession. I am slightly reluctant to say that the electronic list is 'technically subversive' in the French context, but I will accept this overstatement to feed our discussion. This 'subversiveness', I will argue, ends up creating a mutual incompatibility rooted in structural aspects of the French community of historians.

Before getting to this point, we must nevertheless get rid of some ready made 'explanations' that could be pushed to the fore to account for the weak interest of French historians for electronic connections. Very briefly, the lists (and the Internet techniques in general) are often described as noisy and disguised promoters of liberal individualism while the language problem (for international lists) or the technical factor (for the national ones) are mentioned as limiting factors. These are 'good false reasons' which are produced with sincerity. But a train of fast track remarks can strongly ponder their accuracy. A high speed modem connection is not necessary to download daily messages such as those posted to a correctly moderated list, while decent computing material is owned privately since a long time by academics. True, there are some 'technical cultural gaps', as in the case of people who print daily messages of a list to read them (or, better, who make their secretary print them), or when some send huge messages and attachment files to a list. But isn't it more a sign of lack

of interest for the medium than a real proof of technical stubbornness ? As for language, many French historians speak and write English –or what we call English, and most of us can read it. As for the noise of the lists, it is after all quite funny that the boredom of so much conference sessions is not qualified as noisy, or that nobody complains that journals we subscribe to are full of articles we don't read. Trivialness or uselessness, when encountered in the traditional cogs of the professional machine, are just more tolerated. The last bullet point is individualism, deemed as technically fostered by discussion lists where everyone would try to call attention to oneself. Here again, it is clear that such a behaviour is accepted in other cases, and also that the role of a list as a tool for the mutualisation of information, knowledge and research, is just not taken seriously.

If you accept my arguments, then it seems that we are running into some 'cultural wall' to explain the disdain and distance expressed towards electronic lists and especially towards their use as a place where a community can discuss and debate. A list to share information and to discuss research materials, results and hypothesis is clearly not coherent with the scientific operation of the French community of historians, where discussion is too often the great absentee or presented under the caricatured features of personal resentment and mutually deaf competing declamations. From the University benches to the University chair, the French historian is not taught or induced to consider that debate, i.e the collective formulation and invalidation of hypothesis, the expression of doubt, the tolerance of uncertainty and the trial of error and discussion are an important part of the trade. Workshops, conferences, PhD defences and the pages of the French historical journals witness this pattern. This is not to say that this is 'worse' or 'better' than the culture of discussion and expression that rule in some other pedagogical and scientific traditions as far as scientific results are concerned, but it is clearly a state of mind that rules in disfavour of what electronic lists can bring to the scientific life of the community. The very fact that the discussion that takes place on the lists is per force tentative, sketchy, adventurous (because of the non simultaneous nature of lines, because of the informal aspect it takes, because of the quickness the posting process encourages) goes against the grain of everything that is considered as dignified, 'serious' and worthy of involvement. Quite the reverse, it is seen as dangerous, vane and useless. That is not the whole story. The professional operation of the French historical community is also adamantly uncongenial to the kind of communications promoted by the lists. I don't have the time, nor the energy, the wit nor the intelligence, and above all not the will to dissect the way the profession is organised and reproduced. But I don't have to actualise Bourdieu's *Homo academicus* to put the finger on some features that build the incompatibility between the electronic lists and the community of French historians. Three are worthy of being bluntly mentioned here. First, the difficulties to adapt the list to the



power lines of the profession. It is much too early to decide whether those difficulties are structural or momentaneous, but there is at least a missing link between the two. Clearly, nobody has yet imagined that a list could be a way to organise power lines that would replicate what can be developed through a journal, a University department, a research centre, a cluster of disciples and clients, or even a professional society. But this might simply be impossible. Even with a stern moderation system, it is quite unlikely that a 'line' can be imposed to any big electronic list, or that an individual or a clique can rule a successful list. Second, the fact that in a fragmented and clientelised academic structure, information is power and the control of information a mark of the mighty ones. The electronic list, as a mean to disseminate information at high speed and on a wide range is rather foreign to this logic. Third, the way the profession co-opts its members does not favour risk taking. The expression of a nuance, the formulation of an hypothesis, the engagement in a contradictory debate request some courage when such a move can suffocate or compromise a career. And courage is a rare commodity when precarity grows and positions are rare, or when competition points towards a single top central place like in the French system. Last but not least, the list as such is an immaterial arena where identities, status and positions are at least temporarily suspended. It is said that there was once a cartoon in the *New –Yorker* which said that 'nobody knows you are a dog on the Internet'. This is the heart of it: most of us French historians, from the most senior to those aspiring to become seniors, don't want to interact with dogs, and much less with underdogs. This is a world where you engage – through conversation, workshop discussion, book review, or controversy- with your peers: senior historians with other senior historians, juniors or students, juniors with other juniors or students, students with students. A graduate student carrying contradiction to an established professor is at worst suicide, at least a mistake, and it is much too rarely taken as a casual learning device. So what you are clearly impacts on what you can say. The list offers a different way of organising interaction, when what you say impacts on what you can be. But this organisation is incredibly crude for many of us, and seems even dangerous to some. Being contradicted by John Doe or calling historical Kevins and Sharons to help are risks unlikely to be taken by most of us French historians.

You have already anticipated my conclusion, so I won't be too long. On-line communities can build on potential members wishes to find information or company. I think both inputs, the 'what' and 'who' mentioned in my title, are missing as far as the French historical trade is concerned. Accordingly, one can wonder whether there is any future for electronic lists in France or for French involvement in international electronic lists. The second point clearly depends on how much the labour market of academic positions will get internationalised. This would probably be the only way to create interest for information and

discussion of subjects in an international context, which is precisely what the international lists can provide. Meantime, the typical French subscriber of H-Net list will remain a silent reader or a free-rider. The first question is a little more complex. Different scripts can be written, and I don't feel comfortable enough in the oracle's clothes to imagine lots of them and to assert their performing probabilities. My only clear view is that the installation of electronic lists in the French historical landscape will not come through the French historians who are currently the most interested in international lists. If I am correct in thinking they made this move because they wanted to escape their national milieu, then it is very unlikely that they can think of using the cogs of this milieu to adapt some of the adverse values, behaviours and views that are expressed through and with the international electronic lists. But many other synopsis are available. Electronic lists can just never take flight in France. Or they can be expanded and promoted by a new generation that will enter the academic career and use this and other electronic communication/publication means to displace an older generation. Or they can be appropriated by a dominating strata who will bend them to the traditional ways and means of scientific and professional operation. Electronic lists could also develop through unexpected channels. For example, in fields where the historians neighbour with more 'list-friendly' historically oriented professions, like the archivists, the museum curators or the librarians, for whom on-line communities were a logical continuation of a long established co-operative work. There are also some interesting projects of lists put forward by some specialised or avant gardist historical journals, who are thinking of establishing lists to interact with their readers and subscribers. A gradual acclimatisation of the electronic list could be a result of both those evolutions, thus matching a bet made up by some moderators of French historical lists: a step by step development that would implant the list inside the French historians habits, and a corresponding change of the content and attitude of the existing lists. Though, there is also a last hypothesis that it is absolutely necessary to contemplate: that around the world the on-line communities of historians fade away in the next few years, once definitely dried up the river of pioneering energies or after they had been diverted towards teaching centres, on-line journals, gateways and other digital games. Accordingly, the French reluctance to embrace the device could then be sold for a manifestation of a dazzling lucidity. Who wants to bet ?